

# Prince George's County Tests Bar Code Technology

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**I**n March 1988, the Prince George's County Department of Corrections began to explore the possibility of using a bar coded inmate identification and tracking system. At that time, it was envisioned that the system would be capable of:

- gathering basic identification data on each inmate entering the male or female processing areas;
- electronically scanning and storing at least one of the inmate's fingerprints;
- producing a color video image and a series of photographs for use in various formats including an inmate arm band; and
- creating a bar code for each inmate that would be used to track the inmate's movement and to conduct institutional counts.

The system would identify the data, video image, fingerprint, and bar code as belonging to the same person.

The major function of a facility is the care and custody of each inmate until that individual is duly released by the court. Large facilities release thousands of inmates each year. Given the number of documents that release personnel must review before authorizing the release, erroneous releases can and do happen. We felt that the bar code system could be particularly valuable in the release process.

The plan was that when the inmate was ready to be released, the release officer could use the system's output (identifying data, fingerprint, arm band, and video imager as well as information in the inmate's computerized records) to ensure that the correct individual was being released.

We hoped that during the inmate's incarceration, the bar code system would

**record the inmate's movement both in and out of the housing**

area. It would also be used to note other movement within the facility itself, that is, to the library, gym, medical unit, or to another housing area, or outside of the facility, e.g., to the court or the hospital.

## Testing the Technology

The Prince George's County Department of Corrections was invited to serve as a test site for the bar code system in the fall of 1988. Following a set up and training period, the actual test began in March 1989.

The testing population was limited to one male housing unit and the entire female housing area. Intake and release processes were tested only for our female population. The aspect of the system dealing with movement inside and outside the facility was tested on the male population.

Computer equipment was stored in an area close to the male and female processing areas, and the portable scanning equipment was kept in the two areas housing the male and female populations being tested.

**It was envisioned that the bar coding system would be used to store identification data, to track inmate movement in and outside the facility, and to conduct counts.**

Inmates participating in the test were issued bar-coded wristbands rather than the standard issue wristlet. During the test period, roster counts in the test areas of the facility were conducted by scanning the bar codes. All other tracking activities were performed with the portable

scanners, as deemed necessary by the housing unit officers.

Originally, we had planned to test the system for a forty-five-day period. However, mainly because of problems with software and the inability of the vendor to provide a durable wristband, the test ran for about six months.

### Test Results

Our experience with the bar code system led us to several tentative conclusions. For correctional facilities evaluating the possibility of using a bar code system, it is important to factor in the cost of additional staff as well as potential increases in current work load. For example, we found that twenty minutes were added to the processing time of those involved in the bar code process. Furthermore, we had

overtime, the county spent more than \$26,000 to test the bar code system.

Unfortunately, due to the continuing problems with faulty software and unreliable wristbands, we were never really able to conduct a reliable test.

In spite of past problems, however, we believe that bar code technology has a place in the operation of correctional facilities. We are about to release a request for proposals that, it is hoped, will attract vendors who can help us attain our objectives.

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only one piece of equipment, which meant that inmates had to be escorted by security staff.

There was also a significant cost associated with testing the system. For example, during the six months the units were available for testing, Prince George's County needed two additional correctional officers and a lieutenant to work on the system. Including the cost of film and staff